

TENNIS & CHILDREN

Increasing numbers of children are becoming involved in competitive and recreational tennis at an earlier age. Children as young as four or five years of age participate, with some taking part in year-round practice and competition.

The ITF organises tournaments and competitions for juniors ranging from 12 to 18 years of age, and many countries organise national championships for the 10s and under.



For children 10 and under, modified rackets and balls are used on smaller courts in order to ease the introduction into the game while children develop proper technique.

Growth and Maturation

Childhood is a period of relatively steady progress in growth and maturation and rapid progress in motor development. With the onset of puberty, differences between boys and girls start to increase.

The main events of puberty are the growth spurt and sexual maturation. Most girls start puberty between nine and thirteen years, whereas boys have a later puberty, mostly starting between eleven and fourteen years.

Regular, intense physical activity has no effect on growth stature.

Physical and Psychological Development

Tennis is, without doubt, good for the mind and body. Playing tennis regularly has many physical and psychological health benefits associated with it.

These health benefits are particularly important for a child's physical, emotional and mental development. However, the human system can be trained and improved at any stage of life, so these health benefits apply to adults and seniors too!

Listed below are 33 specific reasons why you should consider playing tennis regularly.

Physical Development

Tennis is a sport for kids to learn early in life, and there are numerous physical benefits from playing tennis regularly. Regular tennis play has been demonstrated to improve:

1. **Aerobic and cardiovascular fitness** while maintaining higher energy levels
2. **Anaerobic fitness** through short, intense bursts of activity during a point, followed by rest, which helps muscles use oxygen efficiently
3. **Acceleration** by practicing sprinting, jumping and lunging in order to move quickly
4. **Powerful first steps**, by requiring anticipation, quick reaction time and explosion into action
5. **Speed** through a series of side-to-side and up and back sprints to chase the ball

6. **Leg strength**, through hundreds of starts and stops which build stronger leg muscles
7. **General body coordination** since you have to move into position and then adjust your upper body to hit the ball successfully
8. **Gross motor control**, through court movement and ball-striking skills, which require control of your large muscle groups
9. **Fine motor control** by the use of touch shots like angled volleys, drop shots and lobs
10. **Agility** by forcing you to change direction as many as 5 times in 10 seconds during a typical tennis point
11. **Dynamic balance** through hundreds of starts, stops, changes of direction and hitting on the run
12. **Cross-training** by offering a physically demanding sport that's fun to play for athletes who also participate in other sports
13. **Bone strength and density** by strengthening bones of young players and helping prevent osteoporosis in older ones
14. **Immune system** through its conditioning effects that promote overall health, fitness and resistance to disease
15. **Nutritional habits**, by eating appropriately before competition to enhance energy production, and after competition to practice proper recovery methods

16. **Eye-hand coordination**, because you constantly judge the timing between the on-coming ball and the proper contact point

17. **Flexibility** due to the constant stretching and manoeuvring to return the ball toward your opponent

Psychological Development

The psychological benefits from regular tennis play may help children to learn and develop positive personality characteristics which are useful on the tennis court, but more importantly, are essential for many everyday situations through life. Regular tennis play has been demonstrated to improve:

18. **Work ethic** because improvement through lessons or practice reinforces the value of hard work

19. **Discipline** since you learn to work on your skills in practice and control the pace of play in competition

20. **Mistake management** by learning to play within your abilities and realising that managing and minimising mistakes in tennis or life is critical

21. **One-on-one competition** because the ability to compete and fight trains you in the ups and downs of a competitive world

22. **Accept responsibility** because only you can prepare to compete by practicing skills, checking your equipment and during match play by making line calls

23. **Management of adversity**, by learning to adjust to the elements (e.g. wind, sun) and still be able to compete

24. **Effective accommodation of stress** because the physical, mental and emotional stress of tennis will force you to increase your capacity for dealing with stress
25. **Learning how to recover** by adapting to the stress of a point and the recovery period between points, which is similar to the stress and recovery cycles in life
26. **Planning and implementation of strategies** since you naturally learn how to anticipate an opponent's moves and plan your countermoves
27. **Learning to solve problems** since tennis is a sport based on angles, geometry and physics
28. **Performance rituals before serving or returning** which help control your rhythm of play and dealing with pressure. These skills can transfer to taking exams, conducting a meeting or making an important sales presentation
29. **Learning sportsmanship** since tennis teaches you to compete fairly with opponents
30. **Learning to win graciously while losing with honour.** Gloating after a win or making excuses after a loss doesn't work in tennis or in life
31. **Learning teamwork** since successful doubles play depends on you and your partner's ability to communicate and play as a cohesive unit
32. **Developing social skills** through interaction and communication before a match, while changing sides of the court and after play
33. **Having FUN...** because the healthy feelings of enjoyment, competitiveness and physical challenge are inherent in the sport

Specific Considerations

Physical Capacities

How does the development of the various physical capacities in juniors and, more specifically, junior tennis players, progress, and at what age should physical training be started?

- **Strength and Power** - Up to approximately age fourteen, boys and girls can perform conditioning exercises together. After age fourteen, the training groups should be split up, or tasks should be individualised due to physiological differences in strength, power, and growth.



There is no consensus at what age tennis players should commence strength training. Historically, resistance training for the development of strength was not recommended for prepubertal children. It was believed that injury risk was too high, and that any strength improvement was negligible.

However, it has been shown that closely supervised, primarily concentric strength training programmes in prepubertal children may lead to significant increases in strength and to small increases in body mass, with low injury risk.

- **Anaerobic Performance** - The anaerobic lactic system is less developed in children compared to adults. Children are not able to attain and sustain as high blood and muscle lactate concentrations during high-intensity exercises as adults, even relative to body size.

This should be taken into consideration when young tennis players have to perform high intensity exercise (beyond their anaerobic threshold). Thus, the duration of high intensity (anaerobic) exercise should be shorter in children than in adults, and the rest periods between high intensity exercises should be longer than in adults.

- **Co-ordination** - Middle childhood (age six to adolescence) is an important time period for the acquisition of co-ordination and complex technical skills.

Children who start playing tennis around this age and experience a wide variety of games and sports will have a distinct advantage over children who do not have these experiences until a much later age.

- **Flexibility** - Girls are more flexible than boys at all ages, and gender differences are greatest during the adolescent growth spurt and sexual maturation. It is important to put emphasis on the flexibility component, but the above mentioned aspect should be kept in mind.

Stretching should be done gently. Also, stretching should be avoided after intense training programmes with a lot of eccentric exercises or when the player is very sore.

- **Heat Stress** - Children are at an increased risk during tennis in the heat. Children have a lessened ability to dissipate heat and are more susceptible to heat injury. Thus, young players should carefully observe the guidelines for extreme heat conditions and even more conservative measures may be applied.

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